For the Moment, I Am Not Scrolling

by [Andrew Culp, Claudia Skinner, Adi Kuntsman, Esperanza Miyake and Tero Karppi](#) | [Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023)](#), [Positions](#)

ABSTRACT   Andrew Culp and Cultural Studies Association's New Media and Digital Cultures Working Group Co-Chair Claudia Skinner take a look into Adi Kuntsman and Esperanza Miyake's new book *Paradoxes of Digital Disengagement: In Search of the Opt-Out Button,* published by University of Westminster Press (2022). This podcast is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Tero Karppi.

KEYWORDS   [networks](#), [internet](#), [new media](#), [digital media](#), [online culture](#)

Positions, Episode 1

Positions

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The Misunderstanding(s) of Disconnection Studies

By Tero Karppi

"This is often how our work is misunderstood: as that we are calling people to live in the woods and kind of get off the grid," explains Adi Kuntsman towards the end of this episode of *Positions*. Kunstman together with Esperanza Miyake is the author of a recent book

Paradoxes of Digital Disengagement and in this episode, they characterize the state of our current digital dependency. The fallacy Kuntsman's statement above outlines—that academic studies of digital refusal are simultaneously driving an abstention from technology—is important because it shows a tendency to give an oversimplistic solution to a complex problem. The acts of switching off, imposing a moratorium, or moving to a blackout zone all seem like acts of instrumental rationality, but the reasoning only applies if technology is external, like an add-on feature, to our culture and not its constitutive part. In other words, to imagine that one can switch off technology is to imagine that one can switch off culture. Through this lens, I will discuss some of the ways the podcast articulates the challenges of studies of our dependencies with Internet-based culture.

Tiziana Terranova quickly recaps the origin story of our cultural moment from the perspective of a network: the Internet begun as "a set of interoperable network protocols governed by a series of public and/or voluntary non-profit organizations" and after the network was commercialized, it gave power to big companies like Amazon, Google, Microsoft, and Meta.[1] Individuals and businesses alike found themselves being bonded with digital services in different walks of their lives. Being always on and actively engaging on social media, what Ludmilla Lupinacci calls "compulsory continuous connectedness,"[2] became a necessity for thriving, and in some cases surviving in the changing media environment. Some users turned into influencers and started making money through social media. Others followed, not the influencers' paths, but their daily Instagram and TikTok feeds.

Kuntsman and Miyake, however, go beyond social media and maintain that the state of "compulsory digitality" characterizes our living in modern society in general. The digital is our relationships maintained on social media, the digital is our mortgage handled through electronic banking, and the digital is Uber's algorithm that determines who gets the next ride and when. The term "digital" works as an abstraction of all the practical and sometimes impractical ways our lives are connected to the Internet and its online services. In their book, Kuntsman and Miyake explain that compulsory digitality peaked during the COVID-19 pandemic when individuals and organizations shifted "most everyday activities online, to facilitate social distancing and minimise exposure to coronavirus."[3] While many of us may be actively trying to forget life under COVID-19—according to World Health Organization it is not currently a global health emergency—the state of compulsory digitality is here to stay. The pandemic was by no means its cause but a specific moment in a much longer evolution where, as Miyake notes in the podcast, everything becomes digitized under the mandate of efficiency. The digital enter our economic, social, and political spheres to the extent that the idea of getting off the grid, disconnecting, and living in the woods is a choice for only a privileged few. For most of us, disengagement becomes a non-choice.

Yet, many of us try to manage our connectivity by disconnecting at least temporarily. Kuntsman and Miyake approach the state of compulsory digitality through the notion of digital disengagement. Simultaneously they warn us not to solely focus on individual practices of opting out. Behind the individualized practices of disconnection—Kuntsman and Miyake quite rightfully argue—is the big picture: how digital connectivity has been systematically built into the functions of modern society. The actual practices of deleting our social media profiles, locking our smartphones into a Faraday box, or cutting our credit cards, are ways to resist the digital in our lives, but they can also be analyzed as incisions that cut the fabric of our society held together by computational technologies. This big picture is sometimes hard to see when disconnection is being individualized. To be clear, the refocusing does not try to throw shade on the nascent field of disconnection studies—which is often interested in individual practices of disconnection—but rather tries to steer the questions from the individual to the systemic.

In the book, Kuntsman and Miyake want to move us "beyond the focus on disconnective practices into challenging the compulsory digitality on an economic, cultural, social and technical level."[4] Along these lines, Miyake challenges us by saying that one can disconnect from connectivity but how about sociality? In other words, if digital is the default for social like it was during the pandemic, how do you opt out of that? The answer the authors imply in the podcast episode is simply that you cannot. We are in this together to the extent that an outside exists as a viable option only for a selected few who have wealth and social capital. To dream of an outside is to misunderstand both the role and importance of connectivity in our society and our power to resist. Digital has become the default.

We should not misunderstand this as a totalizing condition. If there is no outside, then the resistance must emerge from within.[5] We need a better understanding of the situation we are in. Digital literacy is needed to map what the different digital technologies do, what they solve, and to whom they work. Kuntsman lays out the questions we should be equipped to ask when we are faced with a new technology: Do we need the technology? Who is the technology going to harm? How do we defend ourselves?

The discussion in this podcast episode sees self-defense as the favorable framework through which resistance against compulsory digitality can be conceived. The narrative is established through building oppositions; Kuntsman places self-defense against the field of cybersecurity and points out that the former is a bottom-up approach while the latter comes from a militarized logic. Yet, focusing on self-defense feels counterintuitive to the proposition of resisting the individualization of digital disengagement and focusing on the systemic instead. Is not self-defense the tactic of the neoliberal individual to whom the responsibility is always assigned? And is not the capacity to self-defend unequally

distributed (echoing the many occasions when, even in this podcast, it is acknowledged that our capacities to operate in the digital world are not equal)? Self-defense—a term treacherously close to individualized practices of disconnection.

The defensive techniques, if one listens to the podcast carefully, are not limited to self-defence and cybersecurity. Digital disengagement acknowledges the potential of collective organization and labor. As Valérie Bélair-Gagnon and her colleagues have noted we should not misunderstand disconnection as a creator of negative space but "part of a continuum of situated practices that engender different relational ways of being with and in online spaces and communities."[6] Disconnection here is a shared relation. The second point is about replaceability. As the authors point out in the episode, we are still prone to misunderstanding the materiality of compulsory digitality: that the software applications we use, devices we own, and the online services we subscribe to have their material basis. The example mentioned in the podcast is the Fairphone, which is designed against being disposable. The components of the phone can be replaced if needed. The question is, what needs to be replaced so that the same old is not replicated?

The reversal of the roles between culture and technology, that technology is not the product of culture but culture's producer, was one of Friedrich Kittler's clever stratagems.[7] If self-defence is a bottom-up approach and cyber security is a top-down approach, maybe we need a ground-up approach that replaces the technology behind this all: the Internet. It is easy to take the Internet, its physical architecture, its standards and protocols, and the way it controls the transmission of information as given. Yet, it is not. As Alexander Galloway already in 2004 pointed out: it is a specific diagram, technology, and management style.[8] Following Britt Paris, Corinne Cath, and Sarah Myers West, "Internet infrastructure is built slowly, over time, protocol by protocol, in response to many different technical, social, political, environmental, and economic imperatives."[9] As such, the Internet has shaped our world in a very specific way unique to how the network operates and is designed. And even the Internet, its standards and protocols, can be changed, transformed, and replaced. "To best reconstruct the way out of a labyrinth . . . one doesn't need to sketch the still visible connecting walls, rather their inverse: the invisible passages between path and door," Kittler writes.[10] If we cannot get rid of compulsory digitality, perhaps changing the model of the labyrinth beneath it would release some of its most problematic tensions.

Audio Transcript

Andrew Culp: Welcome to Positions Podcast, Cultural Studies Association's sponsored podcast published through our open source journal *Lateral*. Positions aims to provide

critical reflection and examination on topics in cultural studies for scholars, students, and a general audience. Make sure to follow CSA and *Lateral* journal on socials and subscribe to our podcast to keep up with new episodes. In our first episode, the New Media and Digital Culture CSA Working Group hosts "For the Moment, I'm not Scrolling": Claudia Skinner and myself, Andrew Culp, where we take a look into Drs. Adi Kuntsman and Esperanza Miyake's book *Paradoxes of Digital Disengagement: In Search of the Opt-Out Button*, published by University of Westminster Press. Enjoy.

Claudia Skinner: So, for today's episode, "For the Moment, I'm not Scrolling," we are joined by Adi Kuntsman. Adi, good to have you here today.

Adi Kuntsman: Thanks so much. Hi, I'm Adi Kuntsman. I'm based in Manchester, U.K., and I'm a Reader in Digital Politics at the Department of History, Politics & Philosophy, and I research digital cultures and digital politics, including how people want to step away from the digital.

Claudia: Thank you. And we're also joined by Esperanza Miyake. Esperanza, great to have you as well.

Esperanza Miyake: Hi Claudia, thank you very much for having us today. I'm Esperanza Miyake, Chancellor's Fellow in Journalism, Media, and Communication over at the University of Strathclyde, Scotland. And my research is mainly around questions of gender and race and the relationship between that and technology, both as representations in popular culture and as technopractices in everyday life.

Claudia: Today we plan to discuss how they developed the project, the current discourse on disengagement–

Andrew: And we will also talk about key cases and paradoxes from the book, such as the question of collective justice and where we are today.

Claudia: Well, I guess the first thing that we wanted to find out a little bit about and hear more on is the origin of your research project on digital disengagement. What got each of you involved on this topic? And then how did you come to work as collaborators? So, your individual stories, and then your story as a pair.

Esperanza: I think I would probably just first of all say that us collaborating as a pair in some ways comes first—well, obviously we each individual have our work, but we actually met 20 years ago, more than 20 years ago. There's a sense of, I don't know, Adi mentioned it, but we were Ph.D. students, so it started in a seminar room. We both had mohawks. Yeah, looking back on those kind of punky, cyberpunky days. But our very first project was actually on queerness and race, and it was a book, an edited collection called *Out of Place:*

Interrogating Silences in Queerness and Race. So, our collaboration actually goes quite, quite far back. But in terms of this particular digital disengagement, I think we probably arrived kind of separately and converged into a point about—would you say about eight years ago, when we started to notice this thing separately?

So, for me, the whole digital disengagement, the way I arrived to it is because I noticed as an academic and also having worked outside of academia, there was a lot about engagement and this obsession with student engagement, public engagement, community engagement. And this word *engagement* was seen as something beneficial for the audience. But I always noticed there's something transactional. It's never an innocent *let's engage with this community* or *engage with the students*; it's *we engage in order to find something out* that's inevitably going to, I think, always critically harm more than it will be a benefit to those. And the way that's often measured and the way I got disturbed by it was how digitality was such a part of that process of engagement. So, you know, social media engagement—all that kind of—whether it's educational, public engagement, everything is digitalized in measuring that engagement.

So that's for me, one way that I was really thinking about engagement and also, I think as a person of color, a queer person of color, I think I've always throughout my life had this idea of engagement and disengagement. I've always felt disengaged from everything. And so, for me, engagement has always been not a straightforward I'm either engaged or not; it's a negotiated position. So those things for me have always come together and I think, well, yeah, that's how I arrived to it. And obviously Adi and I, because we've been collaborating, we've often talked about things like this. So, I don't know, Adi, I'll pass over to you and your journey to disengagement.

Adi: Thanks. Yeah, sure. But I mean, first of all, because we have worked together for so long, we kind of get each other on so many levels, whatever topic you go into it. We started as Ph.D. students 20 years ago, so we've kind of had a long journey through various theoretical and political terrain. But I think also when I remember kind of where this particular project started. I've been doing—both of us really—but I've been doing stuff on digital cultures and the way people use digital technologies. It was migrant community, the LGBT community, people doing it for political violence. So, you know, I've done stuff on LGBT migrants online, on militant patriotism and right wing nationalism in times of war online. So, there was so much of it, and without ever asking questions of what's outside of the digital, or does it have to be digital, and as digital culture, digital communication progressed—and I remember it was shortly after I started my new job, my job at my current university—there was *digital innovation*, *digital transformation*. So, the language of the digital was absolutely everywhere, both in terms of technical and design, and in terms of how people communicate, what institutions adopt. And so, I moved from looking at digital

as being something new and looking at how this can open up certain doors and whether good doors or bad doors: it could create a sense of community or tear people apart. But it was something new being introduced and one day finding myself in a society, if you like, where it is everywhere, it is compulsory.

And as a side anecdote, which I love retelling. I've just been reading a piece of science fiction, which isn't particularly interesting and you know, could be taken apart on so many levels, but that was a piece—and that was about seven or eight years ago—a lot of the things that I described there have now totally happened and became reality. But it was about this near-future world with a range of technological innovations which again today are pretty much happening where basically digitality became compulsory really fast in a kind of very familiar marriage of the corporate world and the political world and everything that's being decided there and then very quickly went from "Wow this cool, new thing," which some people may love, like "we love social media," and some people may not, like, "we don't like social media," but it very quickly became something compulsory without which first you couldn't find a job, then you couldn't get any money, and then you couldn't do anything. And then you hunkered down and died.

And there is so much to be said about this. I mean, one of the things that I was talking to my students about, one of the strange things about that piece of science fiction, is that it was written by a white man, and the things that were described there were long affecting many marginalized communities. But it's only when it hits the center that it becomes an issue. But be that as it may, I do remember reading it, and I do remember actually having a nightmare about our near-coming future, which then became for me, this quest to ask: Okay, what if we want to question the digital? What if we want to opt out of the digital? How would that look like? Is that even possible? And it was scarily perfect because since we started working on it together, and then the pandemic came much later, things have escalated so much more compared to where we were when we started.

Claudia: I wanted to ask more about that terminology and what you think is maybe going on as to how we're understanding engagement and operationalizing engagement. That might be a good segue into talking more about terminology from there in your book. But yeah. I'd love to hear more about what you think is going on as to how we're approaching this idea of engagement.

Esperanza: Thank you for that question, Claudia. In terms of engagement and disengagement, it's an interesting point because there is a sort of growing area of what people now call *disconnection studies* and the idea of digital disconnection. And I think it's kind of almost, well, a field, really, of people thinking on disconnecting. But we went specifically with *disengagement* rather than disconnection. And perhaps it's because of two things. One part of it is "connect" and "disconnect" has a very kind of—well, so does

"digital disengagement" and "engagement"—it's very dualistic. But what we want to get through with engagement is it goes beyond that connectivity of digitality, but thinks to include social engagement, engagement with, you know, the economy, digital economy; so, there's various aspects of engagement: social, economic, cultural engagement. There's kind of different types of engagement as part of digital engagement. So, what does it mean to disengage? You can disengage from the connectivity of digitality, but can you disengage from the sociality of it?

I think that's what we were trying to—not maybe pull out, but to be more flexible in the term of engagement or connection or disconnection. I know it's kind of semantic in some ways, but I think it's a very intentional way we chose engagement rather than connection to encapsulate and incorporate other forms of engagement which are also used in culture. As I said earlier, you know, public engagement activities, social media engagement: it's a kind of buzzword that's used. But behind many a buzzword, there's kind of a more sinister process going on and I think that's for us something we want to critique through the lens of digitality and the way we—I was going to say *engage*—interact, use technologies.

Andrew: Maybe we can use this chance to map out a few of the other key terms that are really establishing the anchor points for debates around digital disconnection or disengagement, as well as terms that help motivate your book. And I'm thinking terms that are both coming from the field that are essential for scholars, but maybe some of the popular audience or popular culture terms. I know that people are talking about a *techlash*, for instance, but for you all, "data justice" seems like a very important term and something that I took from the book that I loved reading about.

Adi: One of the things that we noticed over the years as we're working on the topic is how the discussion about: *Is there too much digitality? Is the digital becoming inescapable? Is it becoming compulsory? Can we do it in any other way?* that this discussion is being sidelined or co-opted into: "Oh, I just left my phone for a bit" or "I just deleted my Facebook account." So, there was something individualized and coming from both a privilege and also something casual and something that doesn't have any systemic questions at all.

And I remember that as we presented our work in progress over the years, people got really excited and said: "Yes! I also decided to delete my Facebook account," or "I also stopped using Twitter." And we kept saying: No, it's not actually about that; one of the things it is about, we believe, is about opt-out as not just as a technical option—even though the title of our book is: *Is There an Opt-Out Button*, with a kind of tongue in cheek and a metaphor —but it's not just about—I mean, it *is* about design, is there a techno-social layout for this possibility—but it's also thinking systemically: when, how, who has the possibility to opt-out? So, we always try to hold the two together: the design software interface part, which is very important because if this possibility isn't there, then you can't, but also always

reminding our readers and ourselves that even when it is there, it's not available to everyone. One of the things that was really striking to us as we were working on this project is how temporary disconnection, whether short term or longer term, is a luxury and becoming more and more of a commodity, as opposed to a right.

Interestingly, we were thinking about this before GDPR came into force. Because you're outside of Europe, maybe to kind of remind the audience: General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is a European law, which came into force in 2018. We had been working for a few years already, and we were really excited because in some sense it was something that if somebody asked before: What kind of law would you like there to be? we would describe something like that. And GDPR talks about the protection of individual data rights and how basically placing the responsibility onto corporations and institutions to inform anyone about which data is going to be collected, how it will be used, to do an opt-in, rather than an opt out, so people need to explicitly agree for their data to be collected and held, not hold it over the necessary, deleting it after that. And you know, we are now coming to five years since it was introduced, and it is very strong, and it did make a difference.

So, on one hand, this is exactly what we were thinking about because we started with digital disengagement as a citizen right. But we also went further thinking about, yes, it is an individual right, but actually there are also questions of collective justice where individual rights are not enough.

Esperanza: I suppose one thing I would add about the individual thing: another thing that we, in our own journeys, started thinking about more and more was the kind of individualization, that in itself, that discourse of making in an individual right, places the onus on the individual. *You* have to be the one to click the button—that's actually where we started, right? But we've moved in our own thinking that it shouldn't be that kind of self-responsiblization of ethics and, you know, if data wants control, then [opt-out] should be the default. That should be the starting point for everyone. It's a collective thing. So that's the only thing I would add about the individual, individualization, and self-responsiblization.

Adi: There are also questions of collective justice, where individual rights are not enough, and they're not enough for two reasons. One of them is that a lot of the monetization of data and profit that is made off datafication isn't interested in individual bits of data. So, the data economy is about collective patterns, the so-called big data. So just me isn't of any interest to any corporation, or any of us, in this virtual world. It is the combination of all users of Facebook, all users of some other platform that actually provides value, experience. And because these incredible, amazing, algorithmically-driven systems know you best, wouldn't that be amazing? And that's the whole discourse of personalization.

So, one of the ways, for example, in which data grabbing of various websites and apps is presented is that we're going to tailor the experience uniquely to you, and that's why we want your data. So, there are kind of two things here. One is whether somebody would want things to be tailored to them. And that's one question. But the other one is: the assumption that the representation is going to be true, that how digital systems see you is going to be true. And one of the things that we've been informed by the work of others who are unpacking it, including Ruha Benjamin, is that the way digital data systems see us, all of us, is deeply racialized, for example. And so, in a data economy that traffics in collective value, there is a limit to talk about individual rights. And while we're more we're both calling in our book to think about collective justice and collective data justice in particular, which is a concept that we borrowed from Linnet Taylor, where he talks about data justice as the right not to be part of a database, the right not to be included, the right not to be counted.

So that's one bit. But the other one, which is related, is how digital rights are not given in the same way to everyone. So, for example, even GDPR has its limitations such as criminality or terrorism. So, the moment it comes to criminal offenses/police needs, or so-called anti-terrorist laws, all data rights are going out of the window. And well we know that, for example, racialized communities, or migrant and refugee communities, are over-policed much more strongly than white communities. This amazing system that is in place and seems to be wonderful actually is only offering protection to some. And again, this calls into question the whole individual idea of data rights, which looks beautiful on paper, because every time you agree to terms and conditions, or you agree for your data to be processed, it does sound like something is changing or something moving on, but we argue that it is not enough, and we must shift from individual focus to collective justice.

Esperanza: Sorry, just going back on the representation issue—I just was thinking whilst everyone's talking about it, the pandemic actually flipped this a little bit in terms of whether we want to be seen through the data, in terms of the way, you know, contact tracing and collecting data was seen as a social responsibility. You share your data in order to contain the virus. If you've got COVID, you share [that data]. And there was a sense of collective move, but also individual responsibility to share your own data. And I think that was one of, for me at least, certainly, was fascinating during the pandemic, was some of the things that we're talking about, like: *I don't want to be… no surveillance*. And that in itself is sometimes a privilege as well. You know, in the face of death and something as drastic as the pandemic, that sort of thing kind of went out the window a little bit, and we needed to, for clinical research, make our data visible. So, I think I just wanted to add that because it was a bit of a kind of flip and subversion in terms of how this idea of: Do we want to be counted? Do we want to be included in that big data analysis?

Adi: I think this also gets us back to the question of data justice. When we're talking about collective rights, we're talking also about that. So, when we talk about should we, can we opt-out of those digital systems, we're also looking at opting out of the injustice that they inflict, wrapped into the kind of promise of being seamless and efficient and great and amazing.

Andrew: Yeah, this reminds me of some deep changes that are happening here in California. You know, there's this old chestnut that I can tell you what your income or your salary or your wealth is just by knowing your zip code. And the way this is sort of going into digital systems. California is considering going away from a cash bail system to a purely quantitative system for all kinds of criminal justice and system-affected people, from parole, to determining how much people will pay for bail, and then your social network, just the people who might be your contacts in your phone, suddenly influence your life opportunities. Or the Los Angeles Police Department considers you part of a gang just because of who you went to high school with. So, this makes me think of compulsory digitality, which is a very important term in your book about how it's not just that there are some people who choose to make this data available, that's then scrubbed and used by these social institutions. But it's something that everyone feels sort of compelled to participate in. So, Esperanza, do you think you could outline the terms of compulsory digitality for us, so our audience feels like they can understand it with more detail?

Esperanza: Well, I don't know if there's a kind of hard and fast definition for it, but I would say that compulsory digitality is, as the term suggests, where increasingly we're moving in a world where everything is being digitalized in the name of efficiency. And if you think about environmentalism, it's paperless, it's digital, it's more personalized. You know, you can book your doctor's appointments without having to go through a myriad of phone calls and things, and it's all kind of sold as—some of this Adi touched earlier on. And so, this idea that digital by default, we're digitizing all sorts of processes across the board from whether it's education, border control, everything is digitalized. So increasingly we're forced to be in a world where we can't operate without digitality or some kind of—going back to the idea of engagement and disengagement—engagement with the digital. And as I mentioned earlier, it's because of platformization and the way things are synched, you can't engage one bit and disconnect from everything else; everything is connected, platformized, "social media-tized." Even if you, I don't know, got rid of your social media account, can you then log into other things, for example? Because increasingly a lot of accounts now force you to log into your social media account, and things like that.

So, if in terms of opt-out, if you don't have access or for whatever reason you don't want to share data, what are the options for you? How do you get a job? That's one of the things that we explore in our book is the idea of opt-out. What if you don't participate in this force

digitally? How else can you live? And I think a lot of it comes from this idea as well we borrow from this idea of internet centrism, [Evgeny] Morozov's idea that everything is Internet centric, everything goes through the internet. And the other one is Morozov's idea of technological solutionism. So, we kind of borrowed that in thinking about digital solutionism: if there is a problem, a supposed problem, with throw digitality at it, including things like if there's too much digital stuff, let's throw an app to help you manage the digital. Everything is digitalized, and I think that's what we mean by compulsory digitality.

Andrew: And then in terms of the paradoxes to digital detox: there's a lot of hidden labor and privilege in it, as well as the way in which it's put in ecological metaphors. And so, there is a sort of greenwashing that goes in and it only allows sort of partial opt-outs. And there's some people who can really benefit from it, and it's often put in this healthiness framework.

Adi: Thank you. I think you summarize it really well that basically the first part of the book talks about various examples of where the space of opt-out is shrinking. And again, we started writing about that before the pandemic, and it came to the fore way more during the pandemic. So, education, citizenship, and health, which, you know, I want us to elaborate on, but these are areas where we may like it or we may not like it, but there is very little and increasingly less and less a way of opting out of it. So, you know, citizenship and welfare services, in particular, or visa applications, or policing, where you would have loved to but you absolutely can't, and they're very much tied to privilege where if you are not a worker recipient, if you are not a refugee, then you have more room to opt-out.

So, we have seen a general, broader process of a shrinking of spaces of opt-out. And then we moved on to looking at when this does happen. Because as we were working on our topic and then writing the book, the conversation about too much digital and digital detox and disconnection was also growing bigger and bigger. This is, I think, at the heart of the paradox: the shrinking of opt-out and the growing grumbling about the digital have developed hand in hand. So, we then turned to: Okay, when it does happen, how does it look? And maybe I'll use the example of environment as one that's particularly interesting because one of the reasons we thought it would be important to digitally disengage or important to reduce the amount of the digital is the increasing environmental harm inflicted by the digital. And this is something that's very rarely discussed because we still think of the digital as something immaterial. Now, when we save something on the cloud, we still kind of assume it's on the cloud, but it's not on the cloud, it's in a data server. And once you step out of communication studies, the wealth of evidence is tremendous. And actually, there is a growing body of work within communication studies. But nevertheless, it has not yet made it into the mainstream of how we think about digital communication. We just think about what we say, and how we say it—fake news, hate speech—so it is kind of about what we do and the meanings and representations, but not about the materiality of it.

So, one of the hopes of having less digital or opting out or reducing would be environmental harms, and motivated by that particular hope, we looked at what happens when stepping out of the digital is presented in environmental terms. Is it this revolutionary, transgressive process of saying: There is horrific amount of e-waste, there is extractive economies of mining, there is growing carbon footprint; we should use less for those reasons? And as we turned to it, actually we discovered something else. One of the things that we looked at is how digital detoxes, for example, if you look at how they're represented, this is, Claudia, your question of representation, both visually and in terms of words and symbols, they're very much represented as something that's about nature, and also *green*.

So, I, for example, did a very quick Google search of images. What if you look for "digital detox"? You literally get a green screen: lots of images, some of them are green icons, some of them are pictures of nature, so there was a kind of symbolic conflation of digital detox/stepping out of the digital with nature, which then symbolically leads to this dichotomy of horrible technology and beautiful nature. But unpacking that, what we found is that this kind of stepping away from the digital was very much presented as a privilege; it wasn't narrated as a privilege. It was a privileged thing to do, such as go to a digital detox somewhere else, costing hundreds and hundreds of pounds, and then tapping into the extractive economy of global tourism, very much with colonial images of going somewhere in the wilderness where you can leave your phone behind. And interestingly, very little, if anything at all, precisely about the questions of global environmental justice. So, we talked about collective data justice. We also need to talk about collective environmental justice. So, there was very little of that.

And because of that, we also turned to looking for initiatives which do explicitly try to minimize environmental harm. And one of them, which actually is really beautiful, is the example of Fairphone, and that's trying to resist and confront the disposability of our digital culture. So again, we're not just talking about representations and meanings of words, but the actual devices that allow us to do this communication. They are part of a built-in obsolescence, part of a digital economy that has so much waste.

I ask my students, how often do they change their phone, and they usually say between a few months and two years, at the most. The digital economy itself, for example—even if you wanted to hold onto your phone for longer, you can't for a number of reasons. The simplest one of them and the one that probably would speak to your listeners is that in most phones today you can't replace the battery. So, one of the first things that goes is the battery, and wouldn't it be so easy—earlier phones, especially non-iPhone Android phones, were allowing that, including fancy phones—if you could open the lid, buy a new battery, and give it several more years. It is now impossible. Apple had it for longer; other phones follow

suit. So that makes them basically a very expensive piece of e-trash that becomes trash very quickly.

So, the initiative that we were writing about is Fairphone, which is a European—I think Dutch —small kind of social justice start up, which follows the principles of fair trade, both the phone itself as a material object that can live longer because every component can be replaced. So, there are different things that can go—a screen can be cracked, memory can be insufficient, a battery can lose its charge—you can replace each of them, but only the one that is needed as opposed to the whole thing, and the core of the phone will stay for as long as it can. So that's a really, really important mission, but also—again, following the principles of fair trade—they as a company are also paying attention to how workers on the digital assembly line are treated, and that the process itself is fair, because normally it absolutely isn't.

So, we're writing about that with a lot of admiration and respect, but also wondering what are the limits of this kind of challenge? Because a phone like that is quite expensive, nowhere near as expensive as an iPhone, but unless we're talking to people, all of whom have iPhones, a lot of people can't afford something close to a thousand or over. And the debate between $500 or maybe $100 for a secondhand phone is a really real one. So, it depends. When I talk to my students, I get quotes where everyone has an iPhone and then they say, well, 500 is nothing. But I invite all of us to step out of that world. 500 dollars will feed you for a very long time. So, the question of, when it's still expensive, who is it open to? But also, in the spirit of our broadest thinking about reducing, limiting, opting out at all, having a phone keeps us in the loop of digitality and digital connection.

So, it kind of leads to the question of is the solution supporting and enabling and continuing the culture of compulsory connectivity, as José van Dijk puts it, rather than having a bigger potential. So, this is probably one of the biggest insights. We also had several other examples within the book of the various ways of thinking about digitality being more sustainable. And I would say this leads to a really big debate of: Do we give up or do we amend? And I think this kind of dilemma is not unique to the question of the digital. Do we make things a little bit better and a little bit more bearable—kind of evolution versus revolution—or do we just find ways to dismantle it completely? And I think some of the answers are kind of a matter of judgment and value. Some of them are about: Is it what you aspire to versus what's real? So, I'm trying always to hold on to both. So, in some of our arguments we aspire to actually reducing, refusing, recycling the digital. But also, it's really important to think about those initiatives which allow in the meantime to make digital as we have it more environmentally just.

Claudia: I wanted to ask in terms of these strategies of collective justice, how important you think the labor movement is to these efforts to change the system. You all have

brought up gig labor that I thought was so important in your work and the solidarities that can form to create change. I guess I wanted to maybe ask Esperanza to start us off in, in terms of talking about this role of the labor movement in our collective justice prospects for the future.

Esperanza: When you say labor movement, you mean the platform gig labor, that side of things? I think it's a difficult one to answer because in some ways it goes back to the very question of privilege and who has the resources to opt-out. And in terms of gig workers and platform workers, you know, we talk about: "Oh, just do disengagement and digital detox." I mean, really, you know? Is an Uber driver going to go on a digital detox holiday because they've got too much digitality in their lives? So, in terms of collective justice, while there are movements and there's ways, and there are studies of, I think it's Uber drivers, who collectively kind of changed the algorithms and coordinated. So, there are pockets of activities like that.

But I think one thing we need to move away from is not to see it as "Let's move away from the digital," because that's actually one of the ways our work has been misinterpreted often. The number of times that we've actually presented at conferences and things, lots of people interpret [our work] as we're saying, "Let's get rid of the digital" and that collective justice and individual rights all comes from reducing the digital. In some ways that is the case, but that's not what we're saying. We're saying using the digital tools rather than letting them be weaponized against us, to collectively use them in ways that are more ethical and come from within.

Adi: I think it gives us so much to think about. And I would maybe take it a bit beyond the question of the labor movement also because the kind of Labor Party labor movements are very in different countries. I mean, I can comment on, you know, the Labor Party and the labor movement in the UK or, I don't know, in the Soviet Union, but not, necessarily, maybe in the U.S., but it is important to think about questions of digital labor, but also kind of remembering that people who are involved in the gig economy very often have extremely limited resources to get organized. And it's an extremely brutal, individualized work. But I think if we're thinking of what else can be done, what kind of other forms of collective organizing are there? I would say, first and foremost, it's important that we think about these forms of collective organizing together with people who are on the receiving end and affected. So, one thing it's important for it not to be an academic exercise, and there are a number of really beautiful for to do that. And I think one of them is actually US-based; it is called Our Data Bodies, which is something that inspired us greatly, and that leads me to the idea of digital self-defense that they mention—this is something that they use and that we write about in our book. So, the idea that we're thinking about how can groups and

communities that are most affected by the violence of the digital or the inability to opt out, or the inability to escape digital harms, what do they do in response?

And in some cases, it might be stepping out of the digital. In many cases, this is not possible as we show throughout the book and therefore other forms of resistance such as self-defense are needed. And these could include being aware of how algorithmically-driven automated decision making systems are working to be able to survive them are resist them where possible. Actually, acquiring digital literacy, not because everyone should be digitally engaged and included, but because these tools are absolutely necessary.

And we got to thinking about self-defense as opposed to cybersecurity and how different they are, even though both frameworks think about living safely in the digital world. If you kind of think about it this way. But cybersecurity across the world is top down. And secondly, it's a militarized paradigm with everything that comes with it, as opposed to self-defense, which is bottom up and community driven. And therefore, these opportunities will look different in different communities and will be crafted differently, will be negotiated differently. We've got a beautiful group in Manchester called Manchester Open Data, where they actually work with how data can serve communities.

It's different to what we are arguing. So rather than saying "No data. No more digital. Let's all go away"; it's saying data is everywhere. It's used by the government; it's used by every business. How can we empower communities so that decisions that are made, are made with them in mind, but also it is really important to us, is that this discussion is never driven by *digital is amazing* and *digital is inevitable* and *digital must be there*. They are driven by *if it's there, how do we live with it?* But also, constantly asking, Do we need this digital option? Maybe something else would be better. And I think it's really important for us to mention that this is often how our work is misunderstood as if we're calling for people to live in the woods and get off the grid, which A) we're not, and B) in itself is a huge luxury. So, we're not calling to live off the grid in the woods; we are calling to ask whenever we approach any newly introduced, newly developed, newly launched form of digitality is to ask: Do we need it? Who is it going to harm? How are they going to defend themselves? What kind of tools do we need to develop? And if we don't need it, we shouldn't adopt it.

So, I'll stop there.

Andrew: I couldn't ask for a better call to action, community driven, affected-community focused approach to the digital. So wonderful.

Claudia: Well, thank you so much Adi and Esperanza for joining us today. This has been just such a fantastic conversation, so illuminating for all of us here and I'm sure for our listeners today.

Esperanza: Let me just say thank you for having us today. We really enjoyed the discussion.

Adi: Indeed. Thanks very much. And your questions were absolutely wonderful and thought-provoking.

Andrew: And we'd also like to thank the Positions production team, including Mark, Elaine, Jeff, Nick, all the people out there.

Claudia: And you can join us for the next episode of Positions, hosted by the Performance Studies Working Group: "Let's Relax," which will discuss the concept and practice of relaxed performance, one of the accessibility services for neurodivergent audience members in theater.

Credits

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[Editors' note: This work has undergone post-publication peer review through a published scholarly commentary and public comments.]

Notes

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